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## **Personal Reminiscences of Mr. Lincoln**

BY COL. JOHN W. VINSON.

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DELIVERED BY JUDGE H. W. POGUE, AT MEETING OF JERSEY  
COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, FEBRUARY 12TH, 1916.

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It is fitting and proper that the exercises on this occasion be under the auspices of our Jersey County Historical Society.

My relations to that organization may cause some of you now present to take it for granted that I was instrumental in having my name appear on the program for this evening, but I was not, and was not even consulted beforehand regarding the same. However, I deem it a pleasant privilege, as well as a duty, to thus assist in contributing to the memory of so good a man as Mr. Lincoln, who was also a favorite son of our grand State, Illinois.

My personal reminiscences of Mr. Lincoln carry me backward in my thoughts fully three-score years. Though yet in my teens, I became interested in Mr. Lincoln during those years. I occasionally saw him, and always read with deep interest his public speeches then published. The first public speech I heard Mr. Lincoln deliver was in Alton in October, 1858. This was at the time of the joint debate between Stephen A. Douglas and himself, being the last of seven such discussions by them, in different parts of the State, during that year. The first time I heard Mr. Douglas speak was in 1856.

At this Alton meeting, 1858, Mr. Douglas occupied the first hour, followed by Mr. Lincoln, one hour and a half in reply, when Mr. Douglas was allotted one-half hour in closing. The friends of each speaker were present in full force, with bands of music, to cheer and make a noise. It was estimated that eight thousand or more were present.

I have never forgotten the impressions made on my mind at the time these speeches were being delivered. After Mr. Douglas had finished his opening speech, it seemed to me that it was useless for any one to attempt to refute his arguments, so strong were they, and so forcibly delivered. While I was an admirer of Mr. Lincoln, I feared that he had too much to overcome. The friends of Mr. Douglas were so wild and enthusiastic in their cheering that it seemed to give additional weight to what he said. Mr. Lincoln's friends were so quiet that one might imagine they had thus early surrendered.

But when Mr. Lincoln rose to reply, the scene at once changed. It seemed as if "Bedlam had broken loose". So great was the cheering of his friends, beating of drums and tooting of horns. Finally the noise was subdued and the people became quiet. Mr. Lincoln began his speech in an easy, direct and vigorous style, becoming more and more forcible as he advanced. As he proceeded, the arguments advanced by Mr. Douglas seemed to dwindle away and were fully overcome. When Mr. Lincoln closed his friends felt that he was the winner, as evidenced by their vigorous cheering.

Mr. Douglas appeared to be ill at ease while Mr. Lincoln was speaking, and during the half hour in which he closed the discussion, he reminded me of a wounded and enraged lion fighting for his life. When he was through, I indeed thought that two great intellectual giants had been pitted against each other. Both were able, patriotic and sincere, and courteous to each other. They did not have to qualify themselves for members in the Ananias Club by inventing false issues to discuss and by so doing, try to gain party advantage. Real and important national issues were then before the American people for settlement. They had to be settled. They were afterwards settled, not by argument, but by years of bloody warfare, which has since passed into history. In October, 1908, I attended the fiftieth anniversary of this meeting at Alton, on which occasion the well known veteran, Col. Clark E. Carr, of Galesburg, Illinois, delivered the principal address. Other addresses were made and the meeting much enjoyed by all present.

During this campaign of 1858, Mr. Lincoln was the Republican and Mr. Douglas the Democratic candidate for United States senator. Mr. Douglas secured the senatorship. Two years later, during the campaign of 1860, Mr. Lincoln was the Republican candidate for president of the United States, and Mr. Douglas, one of three other candidates for the same office. Then Mr. Lincoln was elected. Unless one has passed through the political campaigns of those years, it is not possible to fully realize the intense excitement that then prevailed. I can only briefly allude to a few incidents of the campaign of 1860 in this State, including the political rally I attended at Springfield, Mr. Lincoln's home, when it was estimated that there were 75,000 or more present. As I have before stated, Mr. Lincoln was the Republican and Mr. Douglas one of the three other candidates for president. Mr. Douglas was the favorite candidate of the Democratic party in Illinois, and for his election the party made a vigorous campaign. For that campaign, both the Republican and Democratic parties organized clubs or companies to form marching processions at their political rallies, during the campaign. The Republican clubs thus organized were called "Wide-Awakes" and the Democratic clubs "Douglas Guards". Each party had its peculiar style of uniform; that of the "Wide-Awakes" being dark in color, and that of the "Douglas Guards" red. Members of each were provided with swinging lamps attached to the end of a handle, to use in night parades. Horseback companies of these clubs were also formed, and they thought lightly of riding several miles to some neighboring town to participate in a night parade. Each party here in Jerseyville organized good sized companies. I remember that our Jerseyville "Wide-Awakes" met nearly every night at first for drill, under the direction of Mr. Uriah Howell, who was well versed in military tactics, and who gave us excellent training. Of our horse company of "Wide-Awakes", so far as I now remember, only three, Mr. J. I. White, Mr. Chas. N. Adams, and myself, are now living, though there may be others.

Of the various political rallies we attended during that campaign, I shall now take time to briefly describe only one, that at

Springfield, to which I have already alluded, it being the largest and at Mr. Lincoln's home. Our "Wide-Awake" company, one hundred and ten strong, with M. S. Littlefield (since general) as our captain, and many other citizens of our county, spent all night getting ready, making lots of noise, and riding to Shipman, our nearest railroad station, using principally two-horse wagons, where we arrived early next morning. The hotel landlord and his family, after a good deal of hustling, provided us with something to eat. We then took a special train, which was made up at Alton, for Springfield. This train was composed principally of flat cars, forty-eight in all, provided with temporary seats, with frame work overhead, with green brush to protect against sunshine and storm; the sides were open, and being crowded, many passengers could not obtain seats. On the rear car was a cannon, with ammunition, and men to handle same. A salute was fired as we approached each town along the route. We arrived at Springfield about 11 o'clock, where we found the streets filled with a moving procession of those who had arrived earlier. An opening was at once made for our company to join the parade, keeping with us our torches. After thus marching for about two hours, we came to a point previously arranged for us to drop out and leave our torches, with instructions to meet there in time to get our torches ready to join the evening parade. Then we were dismissed, with orders to meet late in the afternoon near the Capitol Building (now the Sangamon County Court House). After this, for a while, it was every fellow for himself. I first satisfied my hunger, which was readily done, as lunch stands were to be found at every street corner. I learned that speaking was going on at the Fair Grounds, near the outskirts of the city, and headed that way to investigate. Arriving at the Fair Grounds, I found there were thousands of people, covering acres of ground. Speaking from half a dozen or more stands, located at different places on the grounds, was in progress. Prominent speakers were there from various States. At some stands there were two speakers speaking at the same time, one to the crowds on the east, and another to those on the west. My first halt was to listen to Senator

Trumbull, then moved on to where Owen Lovejoy was speaking. The next stand I went to, the speaker sat down just as I arrived. Several speakers were seated on this stand. The surrounding crowd then began to call first one name and then another. Finally the name of Doolittle (Senator Doolittle of Wisconsin) was most frequently called. Occasionally some fellow would call out "Do Much". Finally Senator Doolittle arose and began to talk. After listening to him for a while, I went to another stand where John M. Palmer was speaking. I had heard him before and soon became much interested, especially as he was comparing the arguments of Lincoln and Douglas, as made by them in the 1858 campaign, and whose speeches I had heard delivered.

After listening to Mr. Palmer for some time, off some distance to the south was a tremendous cheering, and finally the crowds surged up against us like an ocean wave. Looking over the heads of the people, I saw Mr. Lincoln's head, his face towards us, his arms stretched upwards, pressing forward towards our stand. He had been driven out to these grounds and was making his way from one stand to another, stopping at each a short time to receive the greeting of the people. So great was the tumult that Mr. Palmer had to cease speaking. After watching the surging crowd for a short time, he said: "Boys, there comes our next president, if they don't kill him before he gets up here." When Mr. Lincoln finally reached the stand, he was wildly cheered, and from various parts of the crowd was yelled, "Speech! Speech!" He then arose and when quiet was restored, said he could not then attempt to discuss political issues, that the great demonstrations on the part of the people we were then witnessing were not for himself personally, but for the great principles of right, which he for the time represented. He spoke but a few minutes, when he sat down and told Mr. Palmer to continue his speech, this being the last stand for him to visit before returning to the city. Mr. Palmer began talking, continuing his comparisons between the former speeches of Lincoln and Douglas. But the crowd would not listen to him and kept calling for Mr. Lincoln. Mr. Palmer then turned to Mr. Lincoln and said:

"I wish you would leave the stand, for you bother me now worse than Douglas does." With a smile on his face, Mr. Lincoln left the stand, and by considerable effort made his way to a carriage, not far away, which was in waiting to convey him to the city. When seated in the carriage, the crowd was so packed around in all directions that the team could not get out. On account of the great tumult and cheering, one of the horses became frightened and began to kick vigorously; the other horse was quiet, and from it the harness was removed, when Mr. Lincoln climbed out over the dashboard, placed his hands on the hips of the horse and landed himself astride its back. By this effort, his pants were pulled up over his boot-tops, the long tail ends of his coat hung loosely over the rear end of the horse, and his high silk hat was thrown backwards at an angle of about forty-five degrees. It was in this manner that he disappeared from our view. The comical sight of this, his departure, can never be forgotten by those who witnessed same.

After listening to the closing of Mr. Palmer's speech, I returned to the city, and at the appointed time, our company of "Wide-Awakes", excepting a few who had probably forgotten the time, met near the old State House, where, led by Captain Littlefield, we marched to Lincoln's residence, which was only a short distance from there. Mr. Lincoln appeared in the front yard, when, passing by him in single file, Captain Littlefield introduced us, one by one, when Mr. Lincoln gave us each a cordial shake of the hand, the radiant smile never leaving his face. The affair was conducted in an orderly manner, except that occasionally some of the boys would give vent to their pent-up enthusiasm. One such was Will Walker, who yelled out, "Hurrah for Old Abe", as he reached out his hand, which increased the smile on Mr. Lincoln's face. It was said that Chas. N. Adams stole a march on the other members of our company by getting in line again after his first hand-shake with Mr. Lincoln, and by so doing, secured another hand-shake.

There were many companies of "Wide-Awakes" in Springfield that day, but so far as I know, ours was the only one to

meet Mr. Lincoln by appointment. I afterward learned that Captain Littlefield had a brother in Mr. Lincoln's law office and it was through him that we were thus favored.

Our company joined in the night parade, which was a grand affair. The streets were filled with moving torches in every direction, as far as the eye could see. The sidewalks were crowded with people, many of whom were shooting skyrockets over the marching procession. We left Springfield after midnight, arriving at Shipman about daylight, and as soon as possible, reached our respective homes.

For two days and nights, we had no opportunity to sleep. After arriving at home, for the time being, we gladly surrendered to Morpheus and ceased to be "Wide-Awakes".

While in Springfield, I met several of my Democratic friends from surrounding towns, who witnessed the great enthusiasm which there prevailed, though they took no part. One of them remarked to me that it all surely meant something; said that he was personally acquainted with Mr. Lincoln, and as a man, he had great respect for him, but before leaving home, did not believe it possible that he could be elected president of the United States; but after observing the intense enthusiasm and earnestness of the great crowds there present, he was almost ready to change his opinion.

The wonderful demonstrations and grand rallies of those campaigns did mean something, as is now shown by the history of the great events and changes that followed during the next few years. It is to be hoped that no succeeding generation will have to experience such exciting and crucial times as followed this remarkable political campaign.

As my thoughts revert back to the half dozen years or more that preceded Mr. Lincoln's first election as president, it is seldom that I think of Mr. Lincoln without being reminded of Mr. Douglas. Each was the recognized leader of his political party in Illinois. They were ever personal friends, and enjoyed getting off jokes, one on the other. At the time of their joint debate at Ottawa in 1858, in speaking of Mr. Lincoln and the Republican platform, Mr. Douglas, among other things, said: "I mean nothing disrespectful to that gentle-



man. I have known him for nearly twenty-five years. There were many points of sympathy between us when we first became acquainted; we were both comparatively boys, and both struggling with poverty in a strange land. I believe that Mr. Lincoln was always more successful in business than I was, for his business enabled him to get into the Legislature. I met him there, however, and have a sympathy with him on account of the up-hill struggle we both had in life. He was then just as good at telling an anecdote as now. He could beat any of the boys wrestling or running a foot race, in pitching quoits or tossing a copper. The dignity with which he presided at a horse race or a fist fight excited the admiration and won the praise of everybody who was present and participated." At another time, alluded to him as a "kind, amiable and intelligent gentleman". Alluding to these remarks of Mr. Douglas, Mr. Lincoln, in part, said: "As Mr. Douglas has thus complimented me (I must confess my weakness), I was a little *taken* for it came from a great man. I am not much accustomed to flattery and it came the sweeter to me. I am rather like the Hoosier with his gingerbread, when he said he reckoned he liked it better than any other man, and got less of it."

While Mr. Douglas endeavored to manifest no sectional feeling, as between the North and the South, in his speeches, the radical portion of the South were apparently as much opposed to him as to Mr. Lincoln, as shown by the Southern newspapers. The following may be presumed to fairly represent the feelings of that section towards the two men during their campaign for United States senator. It appeared in the *Mississippian*, in its issue of September 14th, 1858, and reads as follows: "We cordially join Senator Brown in the wish expressed at Hazelhurst, that 'Douglas may whip Lincoln out of his boots', but we go further. After Lincoln receives his drubbing, we want him to go further and larrup Douglas, and then by way of making honors easy, and ridding the country entirely of a pair of depraved, blustering, mischievous, low-down demagogues, we would have them make a Kilkenny cat fight and eat each other up. We have no choice

to express between them, because it is like choosing between Punch and the Devil."

The result of the presidential election of 1860 showed that the South was yet hostile to Mr. Douglas. The total vote for him in the fifteen slave states was only 163,525, while in Illinois alone, it was nearly that much, being 160,215, as against 172,161 cast for Mr. Lincoln. Mr. Lincoln's total vote for president in the United States in 1860 was 1,857,610, and that of Mr. Douglas 1,291,574.

Up to the time of Mr. Douglas' death, June 3, 1861, he was one of Mr. Lincoln's most ardent supporters in his efforts to preserve the Union. I must now pass over the years of great responsibility and sadness experienced by Mr. Lincoln while president of the United States. Those who were here can never forget the great sorrow which hovered over the entire country, and especially Illinois, when on April 15th, 1865, it became known that Mr. Lincoln had died at the hands of an assassin. Yet there was occasionally one who rejoiced over the sad news. One such I met that day. As we met, his only greeting was, "Hurrah for the bullet that killed Abe Lincoln". It was all he said. When I recovered from my surprise, he was out of my reach, and soon out of my sight.

Had Mr. Lincoln been able to speak, of all such he would have said: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," for his manner of life fully exemplified what he recommended to others: "Malice toward none, charity for all."